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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 000513

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W, INR/AA
STATE PASS NSC FOR BOBBY PITTMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER NI
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: MUSLIM RIGHTS ACTIVIST SEEKS DIALOGUE,
NOT VIOLENCE

Classified By: Acting Consul General Helen C. Hudson, Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary. On December 18, Pol-Econ Chief and PolOff met with Assistant Professor Is-haq Akintola, Director of Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC); MURIC has resolved numerous misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims that without intervention might have spiraled out of control. MURIC, which has branches in every state, was unable to be helpful in Jos; by the time Professor Akintola heard about the problems, the MURIC state coordinator had already been forced into hiding. Unable to register as an NGO because of the 250,000 Naira (USD 1,900) "fee" not stipulated in the registration law, MURIC is associated with Human Rights Network, sponsored by the British Consul. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Assistant Professor Is-haq Akintola, a professor of Islamic Studies at Lagos State University, told PolOffs at a meeting in Lagos on December 18 that his organization, MURIC, has been working since 1993 to reduce religious tension in Nigeria. According to Akintola education is the key to breaking down prejudices and enabling dialogue.

¶3. (C) MURIC is organized geographically, with a chapter in each state of the Nigerian Federation. Meetings are held at the local level on the 4th Sunday of every month. At these meetings, members discuss the state of religious tensions in their area and decide what actions to take in specific cases which have come to their attention. They seek to defuse tension before it can escalate into violence. He noted that when interfaith violence erupted in Jos last month, it was too late for his organization to take action; the leading members of MURIC in Jos had to go into hiding.

¶4. (C) When involved early in a dispute, however, his organization has been able to eliminate problems by working behind the scenes to resolve problems before they escalated. For example, in August the hotel and catering department of the Yaba College tried to prevent Muslim women students wearing the hijab from going to lectures and sitting for exams. The students threatened a protest, which could easily have ended in violence. Instead, MURIC intervened, contacted the university provost who reversed the policy, about which he was not aware and the problem was resolved within 24 hours. In another example, MURIC intervened when the matron at a Christian-affiliated hospital refused care to a woman in purdah, saying that she "would not attend to a masquerade." MURIC wrote the hospital administrator, who apologized. In a third case, in which a Muslim woman, who had been accepted by

the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBA) for employment, went to the CBA's medical unit for the routine pre-employment examination where she asked to be examined by the woman physician the CBA had on staff. The unit refused, based on which the Muslim woman was told she was unemployable. She called MURIC, which resolved the case, and the woman was employed.

¶15. (C) MURIC has had difficulty registering as an NGO; the registrar in Abuja requires a "fee" of 250,000 Naira (USD 1,900) not stipulated in the law, As a result, the group has registered with Human Rights Network (Hurninet), sponsored by the British Consul, which gives them legitimacy and a network within which to function.

¶16. (C) Comment: Akintola has been lecturing in Islamic Affairs for twenty-two years and his organization appears to be both well-organized, and successful in providing practical help in resolving small scale disputes before they spiral out of control. End Comment.

¶17. (U) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR